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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BELGRADE 001534

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DEPT FOR EUR/SCE, EUR SPECIAL ASSISTANT K. PELZ

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TAGS: PGOV PREL VI SR

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF A/S FRIED TO BELGRADE

Classified By: Ambassador Michael C. Polt for reasons 1.4b and d

Serbia Right Now

¶1. (C) Dan, you arrive at a politically charged time in your old stomping grounds. No senior government official here has any illusions about where the International Community is generally heading in the Kosovo end-game but there is still a belief, particularly by the Prime Minister himself, that the Contact Group's (CG) timetable will slip. He and others, particularly in the right-of-center camp, actually hope that they will be able to count on Russia, along with some wobbly EU states and concerned neighbors, to help alter the independence outcome. Rather than figure out how to move past Kosovo in order to focus on Serbia's future and its rightful place in Europe, political elites here are wrapping themselves in the flag in an effort to survive the next elections.

Serbia Over The Coming Months

¶2. (C) The sequence of likely events in the run-up to the next elections is as we have reported: negotiations on a constitutional package are all but finished and parliamentary elections would follow what now looks like a November referendum on the Constitution. Elections as early as December, next spring, or later are all in the cards. Your head can quickly threaten to explode trying to choose among the various arguments for early or later elections. Tadic's failure to garner our support for a Kosovo delay to "help beat the Radicals in the elections" may have prompted Kostunica to move the electoral timetable up. Possible reasons: he may want to have the election before a Kosovo outcome is announced; he may want to capitalize on indications in recent polls that his DSS party is doing better, with a corresponding softening in support for the Radicals; he may believe that a shorter time line will likely help his DSS (as a party in power) do better against Tadic's front-running but poorly organized Democratic Party (DS).

¶3. (C) Campaign prospects for the governing coalition by a multi-billion euro public spending spree bolstered by the 1.5 billion euros in government coffers from the recent sale of the Mobtel cell phone license to the Norwegians. (The Gos has also just announced the unexpected sale of a third telephone license in the next month with the starting price at over 300 million euros, potentially earning itself yet another pot of walking around money with the voters.)

¶4. (C) One major cloud on the government's electoral horizon remains the EU's decision to suspend the SAA talks because of lack of progress on the ICTY front. Clint Williamson was in Belgrade last week to discuss the scant progress on the Mladic Action Plan. It seems unlikely -- barring any

unforeseen developments -- that ICTY Prosecutor Del Ponte will recommend that the EU change its policy when she reports to the UNSC/EU, likely before the end of October. We expect the government may try to pull another rabbit out of a hat to try and persuade Brussels to reopen the EU door, but at this point we see nothing encouraging on the ICTY front.

15. (C) Another kink I see in the entire democratic camp's campaign strategy is that its uniformly negative Kosovo strategy and lack of ICTY results is doing little or nothing to motivate the estimated 2,700,000 drop-outs and abstainers in Serbia's electorate to come out and vote. Playing only to the anti-Kosovo independence lobby will not bring out the large numbers of people who worry much more about the economy and jobs than a hostile liability down south.

My Approach: The Day After Kosovo

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16. (C) Given this difficult environment, I have already begun to reallocate our message, our activities, and resources here on promoting a discussion of the future as opposed to a rehashing of the past. In the immediate future, we are looking to bolster democratic forces so that an independence outcome in the Kosovo end-game does not propel the Radicals to power -- it does not have to, despite Kostunica and Tadic assertions to the contrary. We are finalizing plans for a well-funded GOTV campaign that will encourage the lethargic democratic parties to develop a positive, economically oriented message and to get to work on communicating a Serbia after Kosovo message to their voters. We have even assigned this strategy an acronym: K 1.

17. (C) I am convinced that we won't gain very much

BELGRADE 00001534 002 OF 003

continuing to try to persuade Serb leaders to accept the Kosovo outcome. They won't. But we can and should help them to focus on K 1 as a selling point with their electorate. If we are successful, we will encourage an increasing number of party leaders to do what Tadic said in his public statements from the U.S.: to set aside the Kosovo issue without conceding their position, but to develop a future vision for the country that gives the people hope that Europe, America, jobs and yes, visas, are attainable in their lifetimes.

Your meetings, your messages

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18. (C) I have repeatedly encouraged Kostunica and Tadic to stay constructively engaged on the Kosovo negotiations. They won't. Both are focused on how to come out as clean as possible in the next parliamentary elections and are competing with each other on who can come out looking like the greater nationalist patriot. We should ignore complaints about Ahisaari or the UNOSEK team, playing footsie with the RS and partition talk. As I recommended in my recent message, we must stick firmly to our timetable. As you well know from your time here, everything is not what it seems: much of the Serb bluster is posturing. For example, the new Constitution will have two parts related to Kosovo: a well publicized political statement that has been inserted into the preamble, where it will not have much legal importance, and quite constructive language in the operative section that recognizes UNSCR 1244 and allows for future amendments (theoretically even eventual acceptance of independence).

19. (C) It is still unclear whether FM Draskovic will be able to meet with you as he is returning around the time of your visit from New York. He is no softer on Kosovo publicly or in his "official" private conversations, but he knows what will happen and understands better than most the need for K 1. We are also looking to add a meeting with FinMin Dinkic, as he holds some interesting cards on the future of the government, given his pledge to leave the government on October 1, if there is no restart of the EU SAA.

Private Messages

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¶10. (C/REL Serbia) I suggest you consider sending the following private messages:

- Frankly, we and the EU are underwhelmed by the Mladic Action Plan. While the process seems to have improved, it simply has yielded no results. We had hoped that tangible progress would allow us to consider some additional helpful steps in your direction, but the absence of any concrete headway simply leaves us where neither you nor we want you to be: without SAA and without Pfp.

- The USG will not cut a deal regarding the Kosovo timetable.

- We are prepared to support Serbia's desired sequencing (Constitution, referendum, elections), but it must fit within the Contact Group's timetable, not vice versa.

- The Contact Group is on schedule with regards to Kosovo timetable. We have been open about our plans and are sticking to commitments made.

- We are pushing both Serbs and Albanians to make compromises on decentralization, community rights and the other critical issues for the lives of all citizens of Kosovo. You will get a fair deal.

- Kosovo will only be the single most important issue in the upcoming elections if you let it be.

- We are committed to helping the democratic forces succeed. In our view, for that you need a positive, future oriented message for your people, not simply a rejectionist Kosovo line. We are ready to help you get out the vote, but you must first jump over your own Kosovo shadow.

Public Messages

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¶11. (U) In public, you will have a good hour with a group of political science students at the University. They tend to be articulate and not shy. Polls show that they are the most disillusioned and frustrated group in Serbia. They are hungry for assurances of at least a possibility of a better future. They are not hearing this from their leaders. At the press conference you will get the same old questions on Kosovo, fueled by the illusion of possibilities created by the politicians. ICTY will of course also be a subject. In

BELGRADE 00001534 003 OF 003

general, I recommend you quickly dispense with Kosovo and Mladic and then focus on K 1.

I suggest you consider the following public messages:

- The Kosovo talks are in excellent hands with Ahtisaari with CG guidance. We look to a conclusion of the process by year's end.

- Our position on Mladic is clear.

- What is important now, more than ever, is to focus what is most important to the Serbian people -- their successful future integrated into Europe and trans-Atlantic institutions.

- Now is the time for the groundswell of positive popular energy to reassert itself as it did in October of 2000. Nothing less than the prosperity and well-being of current and future generations of Serbs are at stake.

- We are ready to help meet this desire by the vast majority of Serbian citizens.

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¶12. (SBU) We have tried, with mixed success, to push B92 to begin the transition from darling NGO to a commercially viable media outlet. Its management has not responded exceptionally well - often lobbying around the Embassy instead of working on a viable business plan. Of course, B92 occupies an important place in the public debate here as an important symbol for the democratic transition and we continue to support important programming. Still, I am convinced that B92 has to change. This just to prepare you if it comes up in your conversation with Nakarada.

The Contact Group

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¶13. (C) The CG will be eager to hear how firm we are on the Kosovo timetable, Mladic, PfP, meetings in New York and next steps. Most of them are with us on the Kosovo end-game plan, except the Russians, who want a "deal," and the Italians who are wobbly. I stay in close touch with them but your Washington voice can make straighten them out on their extensive theorizing over where Washington really stands.

¶14. (U) I really look forward to having you here. See you next week. Mike  
POLT